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ABSTRACT

William Riley Parker's arguments favoring and supporting the post-World War II boom in language learning in America are criticized in an attempt to discover a more relevant rationale for language instruction in the 1970's. Specifically, the belief that world peace can be maintained and that international understanding can be considerably improved through language instruction in public schools--thereby justifying the language requirement--is rejected in favor of a more traditional and inward-looking theory of motivation. Students who learn languages learn to know themselves better and are more capable, therefore, of self-expression. The author also urges that the language teaching profession become more realistic in its appraisal of its status and objectives by taking language acquisition seriously, refusing to think in terms of courses and credits, and concentrating on proficiency. Other suggestions supporting second language learning in American schools are offered. (RL)

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND THE INTERNATIONAL INTEREST

A paper delivered at the 1972 ACTFL/SCOLT Joint Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, 25 November 1972; by William D. Schaefer, Executive Secretary of the Modern Language Association.

A few initial qualifications are perhaps in order, for my topic--Foreign Languages and the International Interest--is a rather ambitious one. First, I should note that I speak from the perspective of what Archie Bunker calls the good old U. S. of A., and thus a "foreign" language in this context is whatever language Archie and I don't normally speak around the house. The "international interest" in my title refers, however, to something vaguely transcendent, with the recognition that what is good for the good old U. S. of A. may not necessarily be good for all other nations with which we "inter." Spanish, for instance, is a lovely language, and while we might or might not come closer to that wonderful world of Wendell Wilkie if we all spoke it, still, there is an awful lot of coffee in Brazil and I suspect that neither Chase nor Sanborn were bilingual. I would like, then, to take a hard-nosed look at some of our basic assumptions on a topic about which I think we tend to assume too little and claim, perhaps, too much.

Writing some twenty years ago in his now famous essay titled "The Language Curtain," William Riley Parker forcefully presented the basic claims that most of us probably continue to accept as regards the connection between foreign languages and our international interest. In brief, Bill Parker asserted that "only when men can talk together can they get together," and thus concluded that "by not lifting the Language Curtain which she has lowered on her shores since the time of World War I, America persists in imperiling her international commitments and weakening her influence as a promoter of world peace and understanding." This, I think, has been our basic theme for the past few decades--FL's for world peace and international understanding--and from this approach two subthemes evolve, the first having to do with good neighbors, the second with good business, and both predicated on the proposition

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that something there is that doesn't love a language curtain. In the first subtheme there is actually a villain--the Ugly American--against whom FL teachers fight valiantly with a limited arsenal, French 1, French 2, French 3; cheap charters make good neighbors, but not if you can't parlez-vous. In the second subtheme, good business, the emphasis is pragmatic, ranging from the coffee in Brazil up to Sputnik and the idea of NDEA federal support for foreign languages as a part of the national defense.

Computer language notwithstanding, it boils down to the idea, as T. S. Eliot put it, that "I've got to use words when I talk to you"; unless I can talk to you in your language, or so Bill Parker implies, you will never understand me and I will never understand you. Thus there is "relevance" (to use the word Parker used twenty years ago) to the study of foreign languages, for "what is a Language Curtain but an ironic barrier to the good will that depends upon direct understanding." That curtain must be lifted, Parker pleaded, "for the sake of our country, and for the sake of man's hope for peace on earth."

These, then, or something very much like them, are beliefs most of us have cherished and probably promulgated during the past few decades; the idea, the vision, is surely a noble one, and if I have seemed somewhat flippant in presenting it, my flippancy has been intentional, for I think that between the vision and the reality there exists a great gulf into which we have placed thousands upon thousands of frustrated high school and college students, for many of whom these noble aspirations would best be summed up in that short phrase celebrating the bowel movement of a bull.

I would like to expand on this idea by examining more closely the three arguments summarized above.

The idea of international understanding and world peace through a common language, I would suggest, makes sense only if we are in fact talking about a common language, one which all nations speak and understand. Were the world conveniently

divided into two, or even three or four different languages, then a bi-, tri-, or quatro-lingual world would not be outside the realm of possibility. But it does not, of course, work that way, and even if you take a highly specialized group, say, the 30,000 members of something called a Modern Language Association of America, it is obvious that we do not share in common even one "foreign" language. Chinese, for instance, is a perfectly respectable language, not at all inscrutable to some 600 million people living in the world today, and yet it would be ludicrous for me to print in PMLA an article written in Chinese (or Arabic or Japanese or Russian or Hindi), ludicrous because the article would be greek to at least 29,500 of the 30,000 MLA members who receive it. Indeed, Greek would be greek, and even an article written in French or German or Spanish would be unreadable to as many as half of the MLA members, even if we assume that all MLA members are capable of reading at least one of these three languages. And we cannot, I fear, assume even that, since 60% of MLA members are in English, and, as Don Cameron Allen's 1968 study revealed, while all English Ph.D.s "learn" one or two foreign languages, half of them never use their foreign language in graduate courses, in writing the dissertation, or in research undertaken after the dissertation.

If, therefore, a modern language association in America has to turn to English to assure communication in its publications, why on earth do we think that teaching a myriad of different languages to the American citizenry will lead to world peace through direct understanding? Even if we all agreed that, say, Italian was to be our first national second language and we expended vast resources to see that all Americans became bilingually Italian, we well might have peace and understanding when in Rome, but what would that do for all the other nations of the world? We would need a language of the month club to go along with books and fruits, and that's ridiculous. No, I think we tend to kid ourselves--and the American public--in putting the case for foreign languages and the international interest on that kind of footing. It's not real.

I would, moreover, suggest the same thing as regards the oft-argued idea that America cannot effectively carry on its international business, be that war or peace, without the FL requirement in schools and colleges. Obviously we do need a significant number of language specialists at various levels in government and industry. How large a number I do not know; I hope it is increasing, but I see no indication at present that either the Pentagon or IBM are stampeding to hire those FL teachers who today are unable to find suitable employment in academe. The average American, however, does not need to know a word of Japanese in order to slip his Sony transistor into his Toyota, and it is equally obvious that hundreds of thousands of monolingual college youngsters are reading and being influenced by authors such as Camus and Günter Grass (if not Dante and Cervantes). The "translation arguments," whether in commerce or the classroom, are just not effective; we need, in fact, more good translators and translations, especially from the African, Mid-East, and Far East countries, but that's a very different matter. Technology, from jet planes to television, has of course reduced distances and thus increased interest in and access to foreign countries, but it does not follow that technological changes have significantly increased the need for a national acquisition of foreign languages. I am sorry about that, but we are not going to get very far by arguing that they have.

Finally, I would further suggest that the Ugly American approach--tourism and international good will--is also not as impressive an argument as it might appear to be. Ugly Americans can be just as ugly--indeed, in my experience even more so--when they do know the foreign language, especially when they know it badly. Bill Parker used to draw an analogy, one that I think is basically false, between learning to drive a car and learning to speak a second language. His claim was that even if we lose our car-driving skill through disuse, "who would call the acquiring of the skill a waste of time if its initial and only use were to visit the Grand Canyon of the Colorado or the Green Mountains of Vermont." Maybe so with driving; I guess it de-

depends on how strongly you feel about canyons. But I don't think that this "works" as an argument for learning a foreign language. Even if you plan to spend ten days each January of your life in say, Acapulco, I do not think that is a good reason for learning Spanish (in Acapulco in January it's even difficult to find someone who speaks Spanish). It's a case of overkill; the "reward" does not justify the investment, and Berlitz, I suspect, feeds more on good intentions than on language acquisition.

Well, all right; where does that leave me? Anti-FL? Traitor to the MLA and the tradition of Bill Parker? A snake in the grass at ACTFL? No, I plead innocent to all such charges, for my highest priority as MLA Executive Secretary has been and continues to be the creation of a new FL Program for the 1970's, and I very much mean what I have said on a number of occasions this year, that a Multi-Lingual America is the "M.L.A." I would really like to see evolve in the coming decades. What I am arguing, and have been arguing in all approaches to this problem, is that we be realistic, that we take a hard look at what we are doing and why we are doing it, try to see ourselves as other see us, and then formulate a viable rationale for the study of language.

I am not myself an FL teacher, nor were, for that matter, Bill Parker or Win Stone or John Fisher. I passed my high school requirement in Latin (two years), my college undergraduate requirement in Spanish (15 hours), my Ph.D. requirements in Old English (one course), French (translating, badly, from an unprepared text), and German (translating from a prepared text, a task in which I succeeded after two attempts only because my examiner was even more inept in English than I was in German). So as you see, on paper at least I am much multi-lingual, five foreign languages (if you count Old English), in not one of which, I fear, could I discuss with you our international interests. And I am sorry about that too, but the point is that I'm a stranger here myself, and thus I trust you will take my remarks at face value, for in advocating a hard-nosed revaluation, I have no hobby horse to ride, no vested interests

beyond those that I assume we all share as teachers of language and literature, as humanists.

What, then, do I mean by asking us to be "realistic"? I mean, to begin with, that we start taking seriously the idea of language acquisition; stop dealing in courses and credits, and concentrate on proficiency. Although for a number of years when I was chairman of the English department at UCLA I annually rode out to do battle with those who would abolish FL requirements, I increasingly find that the very word "requirement" is troublesome, since in most instances it means requiring a certain number of courses or credits. Take two and you're through, as if it were some sort of vaccination against future idiocy. I like to compare it to ski schools, where the proficiency concept is used by order of god and nature. Ski schools evaluate individual proficiency before each class by asking you to ski, and either you do it or you do not. You do not move from a Class 3 to a Class 4 skier because you have had a certain number of courses or have passed a certain number of hours in class; you do it because you have mastered skiing at a higher level of proficiency, and to use any other criteria would be, to say the least, unhealthy. No, let us stop the der-die-das dip at the fountain, and insist in our programs on the student's learning a second language, not playing in it.

To be realistic I mean that we must in language programs at all levels of education begin to draw fully upon our national linguistic resources. We have a tremendous potential for developing a Multi-Lingual America through harnessing a latent and now surfacing pride of ownership in national and ethnic origins. Nothing really melted in the American melting pot, and, at least as I see it from a New York vantage point, the easiest access to foreign countries is not on Lufthansa or Air France; it is on the IRT Subway to Brooklyn or Queens, it is walking to work through Puerto Rico along 14th Street, it is wandering below Greenwich Village into Italy and China. It's Poland in Philadelphia or Chicago, it's Paris in New Orleans, it's Mexico City in Los Angeles, it's the Chicano movement even in a city such as St. Louis or Atlanta.

To be realistic means to recognize that whereas the very young frequently have the patience of Job, our teen-agers and young adults belong to the instant generation--instant tea, instant turn on, instant everything. And until we succeed in recycling language learning into an experience that provides more in way of immediate rewards, we will continue to instantly turn off vast numbers of our students. Whether immediate rewards are best obtained through culture emphases or some form of total immersion or increased work in bilingualism or, perhaps, a combination of all of these and a good deal more, is not for me to say. But I do know that we have got to provide something more than we are presently providing in most of our language departments. As Jerry Arendt once put it to me, we have all that practice Monday through Friday, then Saturday comes around--and where's the football game?

Finally, and this brings me back to my topic--Foreign Languages and the International Interest--I think we must develop a new and, to be sure, realistic rationale for the study of languages, one that will not leave us dependent upon the whims of federal legislation and international politics. There are other reasons, better reasons, than those I have rejected at the beginning of this address. It would be presumptuous of me to tell you, the foreign language teachers, how to count the ways, but I would like to explore a few ideas on what to me, as a teacher of English, is one of the best reasons, not for studying, but for learning, a second language. My argument centers on the idea of language itself and involves my conviction that we do not know ourselves, know our thoughts or our feelings, unless and until we can effectively formulate them into language. As I have watched my daughter and her hairy friends wend their way through puberty and now into young boy and girlhood, the early 20's, I have been increasingly impressed with a realization that surely has come to all of us who have taught composition or speech courses--namely, that we are working with a generation of "feelies." "I feel it, Dr. Schaefer, I feel it, but I just can't put it into words." To which remark I say, "Young person, you feel only your ignorance, only your lack of training in dealing with ideas through language."

Anyone can communicate wants. My german shepherd (who, incidentally, does not speak a word of either English or German) can converse quite nicely with me on such things as hunger, thirst, heat, love, and other visceral matters, and in my mellower hours I like to think that Victoria (for that's her name) has the desire and perhaps even the capacity to form opinions and express ideas. But she has no language and, without it, she lacks the means for analysis, especially self-analysis; she cannot laugh at herself; she has no perspective, no framework for comparison, no sense of history. Language, as this audience so well knows, is the open sesame to the world of ideas-- understanding through an awarenss of the past, creating through a vision of the future-- but language can be very tricky and ideas, even our most heightened moments of insight, can slip away and vanish unless we capture them in words. "Let me try to explain." "Let me give you an example." "Let me put it another way." "Maybe I can draw you a picture." We struggle to capture it, whatever "it" might be, through shifting our perspective on the object or scene or thought--what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed.

Well, how immeasurable the value, then, how immense the enrichment to understanding, in being able to step outside one's native language, step outside one's beliefs and ideals as captured in the idiom of that language, and view them from the perspective and framework of a different vocabulary and structure. To shape ones reality through the tension that evolves from bilingual perspectives. To see the object as in itself it really is by seeing it in two or more language dimensions. This is to me the magic of a work such as Joyce's Ulysses or Finnegan's Wake. It sharpens awareness of language; it sharpens thought; it sharpens reality.

But there is, I think, more than this, for a language evolves in and through a particular culture, and as we undergo the transformation from one set of codes and symbols and sounds to another, we inevitably, I would contend, take on some of the total experience of the culture and people that created that language. We step out of ourselves and thus, inescapably, we view ourselves, our own language and our own culture, through "foreign" eyes. If history and the study of

literature give us perspective through time, then I would argue that the bilingual experience gives us a comparable, and equally valuable, perspective through space. It is a broadening, an enrichment; it laughs at provincialism; it is the natural enemy of bigotry and prejudice.

What would happen, then, were we to have a truly Multi-Lingual America developed on this kind of premise. Would Archie Bunker be less Archie and more Edith if he learned to speak Polish? Probably not, but I think there would be a difference. I think we would have, at very least, a new basis for developing sensitivity in Archie, and in this sense Bill Parker was quite right in suggesting that lifting a language curtain could lead to a certain kind of good will and understanding. But the approach is not pragmatic; Archie is not going to be sent to Warsaw by the CIA, not even by Coca-Cola. He is probably not even going to visit Warsaw, although that is a reasonable expectation (people who really learn to ski tend to develop a great need for visiting high places). But I would simply prefer to call it "civilized"--one step towards international understanding through understanding of self. If we could evolve a Multi-Language America we still would not have "one world" and we would continue to have language curtains hanging in abundance--but we would be operating in a very different intellectual climate, moving closer at least to the peace that, not surpasses, but inextricably involves understanding.

Bill Parker twenty years ago called it a need. I guess what I am describing is more of a mission. To those of you in the combat zone, working with large classes of largely indifferent students--overchallenged and underappreciated--the mission may appear to be impossible. I choose to think not, for I believe that what we have to offer is genuine and that if the case for foreign languages is presented without apology and without pretension, there can be--and there will be--a far different tomorrow.